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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to promote discussion of any photograph with students, whether encountered in the classroom, in textbooks, or in other school materials. The guide contains a one-page handout which uses Dorothea Lange's photograph "White Angel Breadline" to discuss 10 photographic elements: aesthetic elements, punctum, title, photographer, ownership, intent, historical context, genre, emotion, and framing. The guide offers a handout presenting these same 10 elements for analysis, but with a blank space in which any photograph may be inserted. The teacher's guide to the handouts explains their use and presents an analysis of Lange's photograph. (SR)

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Teacher's Guide for Photographic Discourse

A Strategies for Media Literacy Guide for Understanding Photographs

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Teacher's Guide for Photographic Discourse

A Strategies for Media Literacy Guide for Understanding Photographs

The *Photographic Discourse Guide* is designed to be used to help you discuss any photograph with students. You may use Dorothea Lange's "White Angel Breadline" with your students as an example by projecting it with an opaque machine for class discussion. There are no right or wrong answers and information provided in this guide will provide background materials to help your students with their interpretations of "White Angel Breadline."

Worksheets can be provided for future photographic analysis projects by copying the blank lesson plan for each student so that they can insert the photograph of their choice. The "Photographic Discourse" guides will enable them to discuss photographs in essays, or in teams, and will generate lively discussion and debate. Photographs are excellent topics for research and written assignments and students can also be encouraged to take photos, analyze their own work and to enhance class projects by adding photographs.

The guide can be used again and again and will provide a basis for you to talk about photographs encountered in your classroom, in textbooks and in other school materials. Perhaps you and your students can think of other useful photographic elements that will add to your understanding and that you can add to the worksheet.

1. Aesthetic Elements. An important aesthetic element in the black and white "White Angel Breadline" is seen in the contrast in the man's hat. In a sea of dark coats, the hat draws our eye and points to the face, the cup and the hands.

2. Punctum. In this photograph, the man's hands, his cup and the other man's face, turned from the crowd, are the most instantly arresting details. The cup supports the "breadline" in the title. The hands tell us about destitution and despair. The other, turned face in the photograph offers a disjunction, or jarring element. It looks more distinguished than the other men's faces and out of place. We do not know why the man is turned around, out of step, going against the crowd.

3. Title. It is useful to know that a wealthy San Francisco woman was a benefactor for poor people during The Depression. They called her "The White Angel." From the title, the viewer also learns that men are waiting for food handouts.

4. Photographer. Dorothea Lange (1895-1966) moved from New York to San Francisco in 1918 and established a career as a commercial photographer. She became best known for her work as a photojournalist for the Farm Security Administration where she photographed scenes from The Great Depression.

5. Ownership. "White Angel Breadline" is owned by the Dorothea Lange Collection, the City of Oakland and the Oakland Museum who have allowed Strategies to reproduce it here. Fair Use copyright laws allow you to use this copy for face-to-face communication, within the confines of your classroom. This usually is not interpreted to mean that you may xerox a copy for every student without permission from the owners. Even so, Fair Use laws are subject to interpretation and you should consult your district's copyright policy about the use of copyrighted materials in your classroom. Good books on copyright laws and the classroom are available from Copyright Information Services, P.O. Box 1460, Friday Harbor, WA 98250. 206.378.5128.

6. Intent. The stock market crash in 1929 changed Dorothea Lange's life and photography. It also forced her to change her way of working. "White Angel Breadline" has become one of the most famous photographs from the Depression. Legend has it that it was taken on the day she decided to begin to experiment with other subjects and to work to please herself.

7. Historical Context. "White Angel Breadline" provides its own clue to its setting in San Francisco. The date of the photo, 1933, was the worst year of The Depression, with 14 million people out of work. That is enough information to allow the viewer to make essential inferences about the photograph's narrative.

Relating historical information to present-day subjects enables us to have a full range of understanding about events. Even so, essential differences occurred between the breadlines we see now and those of The Great Depression, so care must be taken to contrast, as well as to compare, historical factors when making links between similar situations in different time periods.

8. Genre. Dorothea Lange began making studio portraits, but became famous as a photojournalist. She thought of herself as a photojournalist, but was aware of the fine arts potential of her photographs and she made no attempt to compartmentalize her work by type.

9. Emotion. The single man, turned away, appears to signal an alienation and a resolve to work against his fate. He does not belong there. He is not like the others. The man with the empty cup and worn hat has his hands clenched. In resolve? With anxiety? In defeat? In prayer? "White Angel Breadline" is filled with a storm of conflicting emotion. Viewers will identify and empathize with some of them.

10. Framing. Is the man in the left corner turned looking at the photographer or at something/someone behind her? What are the men facing away from the viewer looking at?

Photographic Discourse Lesson Plan **by Page Nolker and Kathleen Tyner c 1991,**

Page Nolker and Kathleen Tyner

Discuss the elements of the photograph below; then substitute other photographs and do a similar analysis.

1 Aesthetic Elements

Aesthetics include contrasts of light and dark, color, composition, shapes and figures, stasis, etc.

2 Punctum

This is a term sometimes used to refer to the focal points in a photograph. Often the focal point is the subject and appears in the center of the frame, but there can be more than one focal point to provide eye-catching details elsewhere in the photograph. These details generally offer the most telling clues. They may support the narrative/title of the photo, or they may raise problems and disjunctions in its continuity.

3 Title

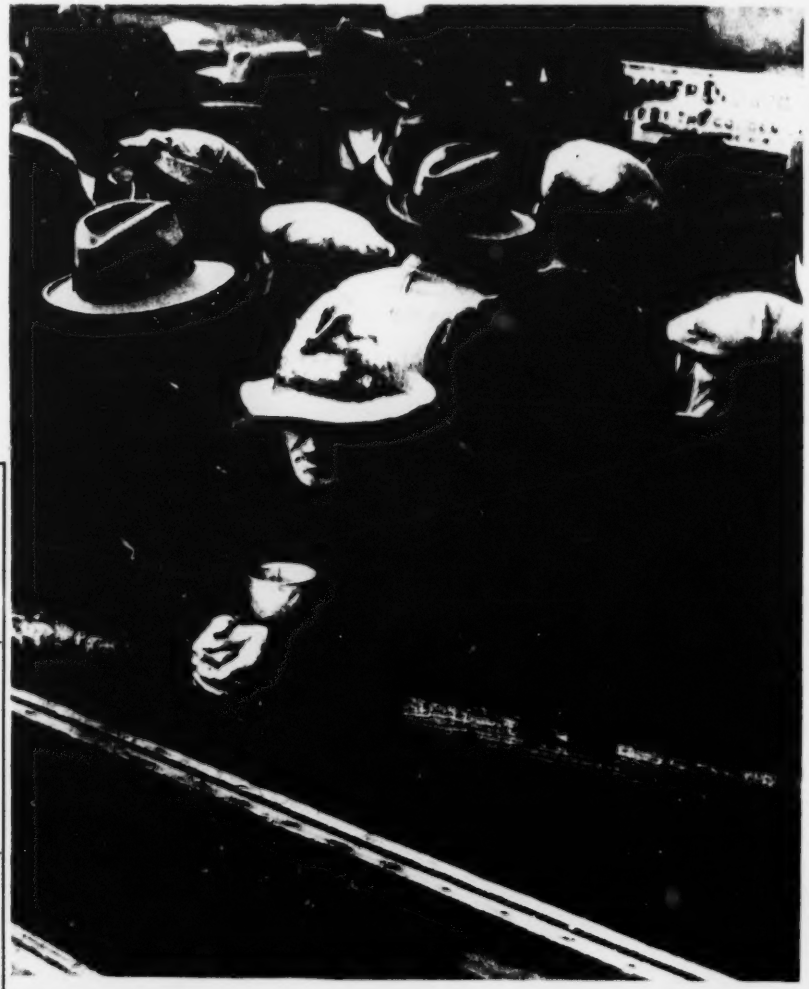
A title supplements the photo with additional clues and functions to direct and inform the viewer's interpretation.

4 Photographer

Research about a photographer's life can tell us much about the intent and meaning behind photographs. A citation for a photographer's work often includes the dates of birth and death.

5 Ownership

The photographer and owner of a photograph are not necessarily the same. Photographs are almost always copyrighted and it is necessary to find the owner and seek their permission to reproduce them.



White Angel Breadline, 1933
Dorothea Lange/American, 1895-1966
Photograph Reprinted Courtesy of the Dorothea Lange Collection, The City of Oakland and The Oakland Museum, 1991.

6 Intent

A photographer's intent is often revealed through their choice of title, the composition of aesthetic qualities, the emotion evoked and the focal points. Ownership of the photograph may also imply that the photograph was taken for hire.

7 Historical Context

Historical context is essential to understanding a photographic message. A photograph's date is generally included in the title, sometimes along with the location of the photograph.

8 Genre

Categorizing photographs is only useful with the understanding that the different kinds of photography overlap and that few great photographs fall under a single category. Different kinds of photography include photojournalism, fine art, advertising, portraits, commercial, documentary, etc.

9 Emotion

Our visceral response to a photograph and its impact are important and highly subjective. We want to look at both the emotion represented in the photograph and the emotion it evokes in the viewer. We also might want to consider whether the viewer's emotional response might be different today than it would have been when the picture was printed in the past.

10 Framing

Framing is a tool for raising questions about the photographer's choices, the creative process of selectivity, and to speculate about what remains outside the borders and why.

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Insert a photograph in the space below, and analyze the elements.

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